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I Am the Dust Under Your Feet
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I Am the Dust Under Your Feet

Walter Abish

FATE

Where are we? His father, on moodily contemplating the thin defensive line of lead soldiers on the green army blanket, had said, referring to fate, das Schiksal: Everything hung in the balance, as darkness descended, extinguishing our panoramic view of the giant fortified walls enclosing the city with its teeming labyrinthian alleys, its open sewers, its lepers, its carpet dealers, its vast treasury, its bazaars, its slave markets, its huge squares, and the magical gold domed buildings that once had been churches, to which had been grafted tall slender minarets. Everything hung in the balance as the gates opened to disgorge thousands of horsemen: the blurred image of their swarthy faces made distinct by the uniform rage, the obscene hatred, their vengeful and rapacious desire to pillage, burn, rape, and loot the hapless poorly defended villages in their path. It was to have been the end of Europe—it was to have been the end of Christendom.

Where are we? A struggle for what? *Not once again, for Christendom?* We are talking of an endless, pitch black void. By no stretch of the imagination is the darkness anywhere comparable to the darkness one might encounter on a moonless spring or summer night in the thickly wooded vicinity of the Merkweise estate. Imagine! Presently nothing, not a motion, not a glint, not a breeze, not a chirp, not a crack to punctuate the void. It isn't even remotely like the dimly recalled darkness that ensued after the damp walls of the former underground bunker collapsed when the massive concrete shelter sustained a direct hit from an errant 500 pounder in August 1944... Here there is not even a hint of panic. No stifled screams, no moans. There's no smoke, no fire, no breeze. No commotion, no acrid flesh burning the nostrils. Nothing, not even a life-subsiding death rattle! *Finster!* Implacably! Inconsolably. Darkness. Solid, tomblike. Not the chapel, candle-extinguished darkness of devo-

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tion—the balmy, soothing darkness of belief that would accomodate a confession: Yes, father, I have killed pheasants, ground hog, hare, deer, bear, and—the confession he had never made—one man in self-defence, and recently a poacher, a Turk who, when I accosted him, yelled: Who the hell do you think you are? In this darkness it was not so much a question of where he might be but what he might be that was of paramount concern. What? Not *Finster*! but an oblivion—yet an absence, not hostile, not fear inducing. As if in response to some stimuli the darkness advanced and then receded, swirling or could it have been breathing? He wanted to hold his breath as he listened—only it was not clear to him how he might hold his breath. *Where are we? Speak up!* He, Rainer, the dour-faced warden, the gamekeeper, the so-to-speak guardian of an estate, Merkweise's factotum, could feel "himself" struggle to give shape to a word—really any word, be it "path" or "tree" or "foliage" or "woodlice" that might serve to revoke the impenetrable dark. Blindly he seemed to reach into a reservoir of words—the mind fleetingly casting about for means to define itself. Really, instinctual. Brushing aside the ready phrases: My turn, bring us another round! If he showed preference for words such as underfoot, marshy, uprooted trees, path, brush, nettle, hare, owl, peaches, root, feathers, stalk, beech nut, spruce cone, cowslip, poisonous fungi, path, fence, burrow, termite, spent bullet, steel traps, paws, grimace, innards, it was because the words conjured up a familiar terrain. How to explain? They seemed to cling to him like nettle. The words as neutral as polished cylinders...as neutral as scattered pellets—what?—that traced his outlines in the overgrown terrain. Even his twill knee-length trousers, his leather vest, his broad leather belt, his worn bone-handle hunting knife, his heavy socks, scuffed resoled boots, were a means of mapping the topography. Only, on arriving at words that implied a means of illumination: brightening, lighter, reflectant, solar, moonlight, shadows, incandescence, did he intuit a response. By exerting pressure on the word, he was able to create patches of light. *Licht, Licht, Licht!* Go on, Axel's voice seemed to urge him. Though he felt certain that it was not the intrinsic word that brought about the transition. The word simply committed him to the rudimentary sign. It reified and more narrowly focused his purpose! The light seemed to swirl, advancing and receding. Was he adrift? Though the darkness still loomed as a presence—a reminder?, it did not evoke any residual fear. How odd! He felt equipped to—to what? *Felt?* He was, for the present deprived of a

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capacity to feel or remember. Words, *Du blöder Esel, du blinder hilfloser Idiot, du Dumbkopf!* kept colliding in his mind. Bouncing off some interior rubberized arterial chamber wall. Who knows? There may have been a without, though the distinction between a within and a without remained at best unresolved. Didn't he keep straining to see a terrain, a landscape? Surely not his father's tantalizing view of Constantinople? Was he trying to determine the extent of the damage to his head? He had walked into them. Confident: *Halloo! Was haben wir den hier?* Ready for trouble. His bullhead withstanding at least three blows in rapid succession. He was the nail to their hammer. Boom, boom, boom. His eardrums almost bursting. Were these knocks of inquiry? Hampered by the trees, he threshed about. His fist aimlessly colliding with a face, was cut to the bone. Then, his rifle discharged. Thinking—Really, these Turks! Making constant inroads even as they pave our roads. Blood lusting, noisy, dirty, gesticulating aliens. *Unser armes Deutschland!* Our poor Germany! Was this ordeal not an indication of what was yet to come? And now? As he yearned for his terrain—would a tall magisterial fir suddenly loom up? Like a sign of redemption, to be succeeded by a row of shade trees lining a country road that led to the tranquil, really ageless village nestled in a fold of the valley? Everything, be it young Else on a bicycle or Rupert fishing from a bridge, by its permanence, gave evidence to support an immaculate view of the world: the winding road to the Romanesque chapel and tiny fenced-in Catholic graveyard skirting Wieland's farm replete with the well-groomed horses and contented cows grazing in the pasture, ducks in the pond, while from a distance the compact black and red toy-like train, the locomotive spouting smoke, became audible to the German speaking people whose faces conveyed no threat as they crowded the platform. The entire picture sustained a feeling of love and/or harmony. Greetings were in the air as passengers alighted. Hallo Magnus. Hallo Hertha. Hallo Dieter. It's like the promising beginning of a TV series! Under the blue sky everything in a state of pleasant abeyance. What will come next? Dear, oh dear, had this intense activity on his part, this feverish resolve to activate the semi-darkness set him off on an errant quest—for what? Certainly the thick, drifting mist was something he had experienced before. A seemingly endless sequence of white, off-white, gray-white, milky, soiled-white substances, textures, surfaces, components of a color chart, were activated: Eggshells, diluted milk, plaster of Paris, the mottled metal surface of a dented pitcher, a

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stained white vinyl cover on a kitchen table, worn white octagonal tiles on the bathroom floor, a freshly pressed and starched man's shirt, a soiled napkin on the kitchen floor bearing on its monogrammed face the earthen imprint of a man's boot as dark as the ring of dirt lining the inside of the emptied bath tub... Ah, stimulated, moved, sensing an inner turmoil! Eagerly he strained forward. What? *Inner?* The color, *Die Farbe*, a not unpleasant washed-out whiteness of linen hung out to dry, then plumes of smoke rising from distant factory chimneys into an overcast sky, that suddenly, with an almost painful clarity brought to mind an afternoon shrouded in mist somewhere in the mountains. Where? When? Mountains? *Speak up!* Ah, that's irrelevant. What mattered was the heartwarming familiarity of the texture and color, the very evanescent quality of the heavy mist. And the air, the bracing mountain air. Shoes clumsily seeking a hurried foothold on a steep stony mountain path. The incandescent mist, the enshrouding grayness as bright as snow, disclosed the bleached pinched faces? The water dripping from their noses. Trying so hard to smile. Why the discontent? Was it Merkweise? Axel? Herman? Manfred? Fellow Germans, fellow defenders of this territory—this hallowed turf? Was it this whitened memory, (the white of childhood?), this captivating past moment, that made him conclude that the grayness seemed to pulsate as if in a permanent state of agitation—soon it (this dense mist) might actually lift and reveal... Ah, what might it not reveal? *Do you follow? Do you follow?*

In a world shrouded in a dense mist the figure of a man, wasn't it Herman?, stood revealed. Smiling Herman raised his hat in what appeared as an almost quaintly outmoded gesture of farewell. *Tschüs, mein lieber Rainer, Tschüs!* The hat, a weatherbeaten badly stained brown felt hat, held aloft, resembled a rabbit—did he overcome an impulse to take aim? Just a joke! Herman. Only kidding! Herman's gesture for some reason remained indelibly marked on Rainer's mind—somehow, this spontaneous and quite genuine motion established a link to an even earlier far more remote past—did it remind him of his father or possibly of some of his father's friends? All he had known was that this simple gesture of farewell made him want to embrace Herman. His dear friend Herman. Hot tears came to his eyes. Tears gushing down his cheeks! He wasn't embarrassed when it came to friendship, *Freundschaft!* My best friend, he told his wife... My best friend. Wasn't that true? Did that

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not imply reciprocity of feeling?

Words marked the transition as darkness dissolved—and he was deluged by a torrent of words. It was as if a massive dike had caved in. In mangled German, mangled English, mangled French, the helter-skelter rush of words preceded and was followed by frenzied queries: *Wo? Was? Wer? Wie? Wenn? Warum? Wieso?* With no rhyme or reason for this furious babble, this onslaught in English, French, Turkish, Armenian, Greek, Rumanian, Yiddish, Ukranian. An avalanche of vituperative, remorseless, biting words: *Arschloch! Dieb! Lügner! Zuhalter! Gauner! Schweinhund! Feigling! Sonofabitch! Shithead! Motherfucker! Asshole! Retard! Shithead! Yopfoyomat! Meschugener! Ganef! Durak!* Words suffocating him. What an unstable world! Words he didn't grasp. Accusations, verbal abuse, recrimination? Grimly he clung to his "I." The *I*, really his "I" as yet tentative, hesitant, unfocused... He kept repeating like some Hindu chant, Ich, Ich, Ich...the *I*, in face of the ongoing verbal assault, having difficulty in sustaining a complete thought. But is thought at all possible in this present indeterminate state? This vacuum? Ich... Ich... Neither *near* nor *far*. As words take shape they illuminate... Is it the ground? The damp earth, layers of dead leaves and twigs, the gnarled root of a giant pine? Here and there a dessicated tree struck by lightning, here and there an upright dead tree supported by a live one. He strained for the *words*...the word for tree and peeling bark...and weeds and cones, underbrush, insects. Attentive to the constant ominous burrowing activity. Slithering slugs, snakes, worms...and on the porous dank ground the remains of a dead thrush...its breast alive with maggots, the color of the tattered feathers by now barely to be distinguished from the ground. While above the streaked opaque plastic bundle secured with a rough rope, a large piece of bark dangled almost obscenely from the trunk, creating a shelter for woodlice and other vermin... He was overtaken by a desperate need to continue adding to this already overly rich colorful picture, *Das Bild*—feeling that somehow he was an active component or participant in it. That everything he could see was not unrelated to the unfolding of what may well turn into a guidebook or a game warden's manual?

To begin with, nothing. *Nichts.* What emerged, if that's the right term, was the final journey...half-carried, half-dragged by three men...his reluctant bearers blindly stumbling up the incline, curs-

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ing him under their foreign garlic smelling breath with words he couldn't grasp, words that eluded him. It was a relief, finally, when one committing himself to German said, *Scheisse. Scheisse, Scheisse,* for the rough rope must have cut into their hands. A halt, another brief respite. Then finally at a signal they dropped the bundle. Did he sense their relief? By now the paint and blood spattered plastic bundle was ripped in places. He was kicked several times—but the furious kicks were, he sensed, more likely the result of frustration. He was pulled indecisively over the rough ground first in one direction then in another. It hardly mattered. What did he experience? Trepidation or was it a final sense of relief? What more could happen to him? He was beyond harm, beyond fear. *D'you follow?* Thrust against the tree trunk, and then forcibly wedged into a slight hollow, pushed again and again, as if they hoped to graft him to the tree. As they left, he heard a man's gutteral voice, a voice that he could blindly place in a souk in some untidy Turkish section of Berlin—*Jezt schnell zuruck. Fast schon zehn!* They dumped him and now—for reasons that remained unclear—had to be back by ten? Was there something they wished to watch on TV? A special Turkish broadcast? Or perhaps German lessons for foreign workers? He was, let's face it, just one of an almost random sequence of events, one seemingly not more significant than the next, in the everyday life of these people. Many words continue to elude him. He felt as if he had just been reunited with a vast universal dictionary. Each forthcoming word, each utterance, each sentence could only serve to enlarge his, for the present, severely limited vision. I feel, he was able to say, as if the words, *I feel,* had become bearers of light...tiny nodules of light. He regarded what was, so to speak, in front of him with the wary alertness of an art historian evaluating a painting of dubious origin. Everything was significant. Aesthetically it was quite disturbing—where had he encountered something like it before? An artistic depiction of a forest, a shaft of light piercing the thick canopy of leaves overhead. At first glance the bundle—what else to call it?—was not as conspicuous as one might suspect. From its odd shape it might contain anything. It was large enough, however, to contain a body—a by now, it was to be assumed, rigid body. Why on earth are you so rigid, Axel used to ask him. There's nothing to fear. What a laugh! Axel attempting to reassure him. Rainer, believe me, no one is blaming you! If anything, they, Axel had said, waving his arm dramatically, they are out to get me! *I* am the one to get the bullet, not you. I have more enemies than I can count... It

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occurred to him that the misshapen plastic bundle wedged against the tree could not even remotely be viewed as part of the underbrush or an extrusion of the tree. He was able to recollect the final journey up the incline, the three men carrying the awkward bundle, frequently stumbling, speaking in what was to them a foreign language, the imprecations: *Scheisse* and *Scheissdreck* and *Scheisskerl*, most likely being the first words they had picked up. Why the German? Each mispronounced word unfurling its blunt message, like an endless banner headline against the darkness that, for all he knew, served as a *screen* or a *monitor.* Correct me, he wanted to say, just correct me if *I* am not here...being assaulted by the *Feinde Christus!*, the enemies of Christ (what a quaint way of putting it!) a deadweight, wrapped in several layers of paint splattered plastic including an old discolored shower curtain, the innermost layer caked with blood.

The body eludes detection. Yet, it is not even well concealed. The part of the forest in which it has been left is not free of incursions.

It is only a matter of time! There are the poachers, there are the furtive lovers, there are the occasional groups of nature lovers who follow or attempt to follow the trails—all now decidedly *off-limits*—that he, Merkweise's factotum, had so painstakingly marked in the late 50s. There are the members (he knew by name) of the local mushroom society who have a permit—renewed annually—to walk in the woods...and then there are people with the Great Danes—large, friendly, inquisitive animals, noses to the ground, sniffing, sniffing, and then the people who like to seek out a clearing in the forest, there undisturbed to read poetry—Hölderlin or Rilke, or even, who's to say, Hofmannsthal? Still, let's face it, this was not the most rewarding section of the forest to visit. There were the obstacles to consider: In addition to a chain fence running the length of the autobahn, there were signs indicating that the forest, at least this part, was private property. In general (we!) the Germans could be relied upon to obey signs...but perhaps these signs were not sufficiently persuasive, or clear? Furthermore, unbelievable as it may sound, the chain fence had been cut quite expertly in a number of places to permit access... In one or two places alongside the mesh fence, the forest had become a kind of dumping ground, for an unwanted chair, old tires, a stained mattress, a wrecked motorbike, bent aluminum window frames, an assortment of plastic containers

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and bottles, and garish bright yellow and red plastic toys. Over a period of time new footpaths criss-crossed the forest—it might be argued that one wasn't breaking the law as long as one happened to follow what appeared to be an existing marked trail.

The decaying body continued to attract the large bluebottle flies, the ants, the occasional predator. By now, the ripped plastic with its wealth of gnats, beetles, butterflies permanently affixed to the gummy surface *beneath* which, none other than *he*, Rainer...remained, in a manner of speaking, grafted to his former terrain. Now and then a small furry animal would cautiously approach to bury its moist nose in one of the ever widening tears of the plastic.

Why the anger? His favorite hunting rifle forcibly taken from his hands. As he was clobbered from behind... If instead he had been armed with an Israeli Uzi, it would have been another story, wouldn't it?

Eins, wei, drei... It would seem that he now had acquired a greater freedom of movement. *How come?* This newly acquired mobility permitted him slowly to rise, admittedly with some effort, to the crest of the trees and peer over this undulating sea of green. But this maneuverability was shortlived...the energy it required quickly exhausted... The colors he perceived were unnaturally rich... He felt himself to be temporarily stranded—like someone between floors in a faulty elevator.

Can't you just enjoy things, his wife asked. Can't you just accept things without dispassionately putting them out of the way? Is pleasure outside your capacity, and then, seeing his stormy face, Oh I beg your pardon. I've forgotten. You are the game warden, Merkweise's factotum! The expert guide. There's pleasure to be derived from that. We know!

Was it a humming sound? A swarm of bees about to settle on him? How unsettling. Bees? He listened carefully. Not bees. He concentrated on the sound that, like a short-wave radio broadcast was filled with sudden static. Ah, more words. Suddenly, how to explain, he, yes *he,* felt invaded by a foreign, a repulsive presence: But where, by what means? He felt like a balloon that suddenly, without warning,

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had been inflated. A child's voice intruded, it seemed it came from within, asking: What is it? And the other, a matter-of-fact adult voice, replied, in German: Tod! And then, calmly recited: Knife, watch, keys, whistle, comb, swastika, wallet, money, driver's license...

What is Tod?

One drifts...he was able to extend his movements. Two trespassers, men he knew from the village—they had sat at the same table in the bar only a month ago—now standing with their pointer in front of a gravestone in a clearing. *Kriegsgrab. Elf Unbekannte Israeliten.* The taller one shaking his head in bewilderment. I've never come across this before. As late as 1945, said the other... The dog left their side, attracted by something on the edge of the clearing. Would the dog reach the plastic bundle? How many days had it been since... One of the two men had pulled a small bag from his pack and now with a tiny shovel was rapidly digging up earth alongside the gravestone. What are you doing? It's for the plants at home... Plants? His companion stared uncomprehendingly at him. Enriched earth...the tall one explained, and both exploded with laughter, not in the least concerned that he, Rainer, might come upon them in the clearing. Rainer was angered by the clear disrespect—the actual contempt they were showing. Dusting himself off, the man rose from his kneeling position and whistled for the dog. To Rainer it sounded like a collective whistle to which he, as well, would gladly have responded. Could he not materialize as a dog? Wagging his tail. Looking to his master for approval.

For how long would the bundle remain intact? Wasn't it merely a question of time? Another downpour, a lightning storm or two...by now the body lay exposed, the plastic partially undone, though the rope binding it still held. A colony of ants had established a network... Frequent sightings of rabbits, skunks, an occasional fox...

At night an earthshaking crash from the near distance: The sound of crunching metal, and prolonged yells as two or more speeding cars collided on the Autobahn...followed shortly by the howl of sirens... He was quite content to remain beyond reach. Daytime the humming sound recurred...or was it a wailing sound? Prayer? Then words—definitely words, a vehement rush of words... Talk! Talk! Can't it talk? a voice kept asking. Rainer tried. He tried his best but

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evidently he was on another wavelength. My name is Rainer, he kept saying. I am the warden. If you can hear me, would you please... It was useless.

OLD NEWS: WE ARE THE DUST...

What do we know? There are guards, of course. But they are not in evidence. There's also an alarm. Trespassers have cut openings in the tall chain fence that runs alongside the highway. Now and then an intruder is spotted and chased by one of the groundkeepers—but they are woefully understaffed. Like Rainer, most of the staff live in the nearby town. Most of the staff are middle-aged. They have worked on the estate for years. They regard with misgiving the changes that are being made. Perhaps they feel threatened despite what they have been told. Change is threatening. But there's a marked absence of panic. In the large white tiled kitchen the immense old-fashioned cast-iron gas stove and oven is blackened with layers and layers of encrusted dirt. Nothing has been done to modernize the cavernous kitchen. That may be its charm. Entering the kitchen one can visualize what life might have been like years and years ago. At the moment the fire is out—nothing is being cooked. The large pots and pans and other kitchen utensils are neatly arranged on white shelves or hanging from the wall. The door to the pantry is open, showing a well-stocked cupboard. The curtainless window gives out on the side facing the pool. An elderly woman, gray hair in a bun, scrubs her hands at the kitchen sink, then while drying them, thoughtfully looks at the kitchen table on which she had placed a white bowl, onions, carrots, leeks, and the four skinned rabbits.

What do we know? Now and then someone sweeps the kitchen floor. Now and then someone washes the tiled walls and half-heartedly attempts to scour the oven. Now and then, someone will polish the brass doorknobs and wax the steps. From the kitchen window, which rattles in the wind, one can see the gravel path that leads to the area of the swimming pool and from there to the woods. Though the pool itself and the young woman floating, face upward, in the pool are concealed behind the tall hedges. How's the day coming along? A few leaves on the pool's surface are being pushed by the Easterly wind. And reflected on its shimmering surface one is able to

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see the tops of the tall firs...as well as the shingled roof of the guest house nearest the pool. A solitary worker is mending the roof. Now and then his swarthy foreign face is mirrored in the pool, as he directs his glance downward, at the young woman in the bikini. The Turks are simply not yet fully accustomed to European behavior—to European or German sexual immodesty. Someone has carelessly left the water running in the bath house. A mop, a bucket, a box of scrubbing powder on the floor near the basin half-filled with water, indicate the presence of the pool attendant. But the man is nowhere in evidence. There was a long green hose, uncoupled, waiting to be stowed away. And what about the woman serenely floating in the pool? The three painters in paint-covered overalls and with paper hats made from the local newspaper were on a scaffold, unhurriedly painting the front of the building. The one painting the window frame keeps inquisitively peering into the room. From a distance, there was no telling they weren't German. Nothing to indicate they weren't painting the building in a manner entirely consistent with being German. They spoke Turkish rapidly, unself-consciously. Most likely in a dialect. But, they spoke like men who have come to feel at home. Men with little to conceal, little to fear. Men who have come to know their (or our?) rights. If someone from below were to address them in German, they'd respond in kind, without giving it a second thought. They know the basic words. Just enough to get by. *Ja, ja. Sicher. Bald, Morgen. Heute. Fertig,* and so on. If they spoke Turkish too loudly, it may have been because they were culturally conditioned to do so. Or, out of necessity, in order to make themselves heard. But still the question remains—why would the estate employ Turks? Was it so difficult to find Germans to do the job? Were they trying to save money? Were the Turks in the employ of a German contractor?

How close are we to the surface? Wurm is endlessly preoccupied with distances...as if, at this stage, by trying to determine our precise location, our "resting" place, he might actually succeed in obtaining some form of mental (what else?) release—Is his reluctance to follow *my* example the result of an innate timidity?

We continue in the belief that we are communicating with each other. Wurm speculates that there may be less than one meter of earth between us and the earth's surface. It's immaterial. For all it matters the Pyramid of Cheops might be resting on top of us. If you

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are willing to ascend to the top, as I refer to it, you will in all likelihood discover within yourself the means to do so. Just follow me. Wurm, sagaciously: Ascend...? How well you put it. I understand your unseemly haste. Haste? And your unease. Unease? It's just curiosity!

Silence. Was it sufficiently funereal? Given our state... Our state of what? Deprivation? No, aren't we being pleasantly enriched? In any event, given our present contemplative state, a solitude only disturbed by the nocturnal animals, by the beehive of activity as animals burrow into the moist earth... Not to mention the maggots... One soon overlooks the distressing physical side of things as the bones (whose bones?) are picked clean... Our community. As the stone marked *Kriegsgrab. Elf Unbekannte Israeliten 1945.* in the clearing above would indicate. The information on the stone is terse.

What do I know? Leaning against the kitchen wall is an old bicycle. A cheap German bicycle. It has seen better days. It's not unlike the one my son rode at fourteen. Feverishly he kept practicing as if for a marathon. He used to ride from Allersheim to Giebelstadt, to Geroldshausen, to Oberalterheim, to Reicheberg, to Gossmansdorf, to Acholdhausen, to Marktbreit, to Kitzingen. When I asked him why, he would only say that it might come in useful one day. I didn't object. By that time I had other thoughts on my mind. At least he was keeping in shape. The day before I had to report to the Gestapo, I saw him off to Switzerland—wearing his scout's uniform, with a knapsack of food, his scout's knife and a good map—Well, Germans tend to respect uniforms, he said—Don't worry, I'll get through. If you get through, give my love to Klaus. They're not going to stop a boyscout! he said. The following day while being questioned by an officer who had read some of my books, though so much was at stake, perhaps my life, I kept following Eduard on his bicycle, as he headed for Switzerland... I was convinced that nothing would stop him. Are you listening? My interrogator yelled at me. If only I had not procrastinated. If only I too had been fourteen, and able to don a uniform and join him. As I slip into the kitchen, to observe calmly the motions of the stern-faced gray-haired woman prepare a rabbit stew, her every move is part of a continuum—Rabbits had been cut up and cooked in here for ages. Though I do not like the taste of rabbit how gladly I would have sat down at the long table and let this woman serve me a bowl. Would I not be embracing

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Being, for that matter, embracing our Germany as I spoon the hot rabbit into my mouth. I'm convinced that the German thinker I so admire would have agreed. He lived in an austere cabin—at least part of the time—and must have been accustomed to the proximity of rabbits. The more I think of it, rabbit stew cannot have been all that far removed from Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes about which the thinker had written so eloquently, so movingly, so convincingly.

I can't bear this, said Wurm. You equate fantasy to Being! Well, I wish you'd hear me out. Being is life! Wurm shouted.

Why not a painting as a means of contemplating Being? I ask myself. With little effort I could bring myself to see the two women and a man on a balcony...the seated pensive looking young woman with the black hair and large luminous dark eyes, fan in hand, is wearing an organdy dress with broad sleeves...the loosely cut dress concealing her figure... At her feet, sheltered beneath the bench, a small Pekingese...to her right a large purple or was it blue potted hydrangea, and to the right, close behind her, a matronly round-shouldered lady, also in white, a tulle hat made to resemble a white flower on her head, parasol firmly held against her bosom...while, to the rear, standing erect with a proprietory air, the man in the dark suit, blue cravat, a lighted cigarette in his hand, dominated the center (the heart?) of the painting, *but what painting!*, appearing to be dreamily staring into the middle distance...and now, as I peer into the green shuttered interior, to determine what or who is holding up the decanter or is it a teapot...the face of a young man resembling Eduard emerges... Their son? I seem to be entering my own home. I am being welcomed.

I cannot deny Wurm's assertion that to raise the subject of Being is irrevocably to return to the moment it (Being!) was extinguished. Not it, we!, he said. Sure, you bet. I am not trying to obfuscate... I am not effacing the notion of Being. I can view it or its absence quite calmly. Shamefully, of course. The squalid ending, I remember, showed such a disrespect. But there just weren't many options available. To begin with they—our locals, *Unsere Ortsansässige*, from the nearby village, including some of the now elderly nature lovers who once in a while come to traipse in the woods in search of wild mushrooms, were rounded up for this distasteful task by the

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disdainful Americans, the "victors," and with handkerchiefs protectively tied over their noses, unceremoniously slung us into the large hole, the pit they had dug...and then, having liberally sprinkled the grotesquely intertwined corpses with chloride of lime to hasten our decomposition—I took it to be a benediction—shoveled fiercely to fill the open grave. Did I not have every right to expect darkness, eternal silence. I expected void. An absence of language. A year, perhaps two years later someone, was it out of a misplaced German sense of duty?, had a stone marking our communal death placed on the burial site. Where did the massive stone bearing the inscription: *Kriegsgrab. Elf Unbekannte Israeliten 1945*, originate? How did they haul it up the incline? It's not at all that steep, Wurm assured me. Still, it was an effort. Germans, Wurm says contemptuously (as though he himself were not German to the bone, ha ha) do not mind making an effort if it is called for. Meanwhile, what effort are they taking to repair the remaining damage... What damage? I ask. From what I saw, said Wurm...with my own eyes...destroyed cities...bridges, towns...villages...there's—then his voice fades.

How readily, I said to Wurm, on viewing an impressionist painting one is prepared to share if not participate in the painter's essentially euphoric vision... The painting of the bar at the Folies-Bergère. The bowl of tangerines, the flowers in the wine glass, the pendant on the neck of the seemingly young waitress. Everything, her short blond hair, full lips, even her hands resting on the edge of the marble counter, the inwardness of her gaze, hung in the balance. A double interior. The actual and the mirrored interior of the crowded bar. Just details, you might say offhandedly. Or, if you please, take the group on the balcony that I have come to consider my...my... How can I put it? I still don't know if the canvas is intended to designate afternoon or morning...but seeing them assembled—watching people pass by or about to go for a Sunday stroll?—I can with ease expand this vision of mine: The doors in the large living room lead to corridors, bedrooms, a study...books...also a kitchen, pantry... I am acquainted with the feel of the ornate green metal railing of the balcony on which the young pensive woman is resting one arm... A pose? Of course! The charming gold pendant is dangling from a green ribbon around her slim throat, a green to match the railing and shutters. The parasol is green and so are the rolled-up bamboo blinds barely visible above the wide open doorway to the balcony. I feel as if I might have woken up in that cool apartment... The man's brown

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hair is brushed back. Presently, in his raised hand he is holding a cigarette. His withdrawn or inward look matches that of the young woman. Are they waiting? There are delicate blue flowers painted on the white glazed China pot that contains the hydrangea. A tiny black and white ball lies within reach of the well-groomed Pekingese. In appearance they are Spanish... Where could I possibly have seen the painting?

Now... A thinker I admired who used to live and teach not all that far from here—What's his name, Wurm promptly asked—in the tradition of German philosophers, methodically inquired into the nature of being. *What is being?* Can there be a more worthwhile question? *What is existence?* His book duly received acclaim not as an inquiry but, to my mind, a stubborn almost physical test—it tested both the endurance of the reader and challenged Being. You see Being as a test? No, no. There are, of course, repetitions. Being does repeat itself over and over again. As for myself, with justification I have feared drowning, I have feared illness, I have feared impotence, I have feared death and above all, like any sensible intellectual, I have feared fear. On one occasion, quite by accident (there's no such thing! Wurm interjected) I found myself in the vicinity of the philosopher's cabin. *Ah, der Denker! Dort lebt er*, the local peasants said, obligingly pointing in one or another direction. But I wasn't being misled intentionally. When I finally located the cabin he had built as a young man, I saw that from the outside it resembled every other log cabin in the area. There was nothing to indicate that the quest for being was intensely pursued inside. By going to visit the place where he stayed—at least viewing it discreetly from a distance, if indeed it was his cabin and not that of a simple farmer or "peasant" to use the philosopher's term, I felt I too was approaching or coming to grips with that most significant of questions. But unlike the impressionist painting I keep describing, I found nothing welcoming—at least aesthetically—in that isolated group of cabins on the grassy slope not all that far from here. I stood thinking that momentarily he or his wife might emerge from the dark interior and seeing me, would in a gesture of *Gastfreundschaft* not all that uncommon in the region, invite me in—I would have gone willingly, but not feeling, I suspect, entirely at ease.

Words keep sliding by, eluding me. I keep returning to the sunny room on the Riviera. Another balcony, a picturesque view of a small

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garden. The red-bearded man, in blue striped pajamas, to the left of the painting, hands thrust in his jacket pockets, is staring at the seated woman facing him. The scene provides a welcome flatness. The woman in a black gown with a green collar, is steadfastly meeting the man's gaze. Entitled "The Conversation," there's none in evidence. The blue walls, the blue chair on which the woman is seated, the blue pajamas, the blue pond with the red tulips in the garden, are the painter's resolute way of enhancing a sense of Being that, in actual life, one may fail to observe. In any event, the red-bearded man does not share the viewers so-to-speak privileged view. He is intently staring, or glaring at the black-haired woman who may or may not be his wife. What do I read into the painting? A balanced view? Being is ready to accommodate the man and woman and the large window cut into the blue wall. It is Being that waited for me to assess their value. It seemed to inquire: What more can I do for you? Can I enhance your sense of well-being by adding blue shutters, a blue table?, blue chairs? As in life, everything is prepared to fall in place.

Where are we? Twenty kilometers north of Selten as the crow flies. One voice responds obligingly to another. We are speaking Hochdeutsch. There is a pleasant melodious ring to this exchange. Right? Even now, in our present state, there are challenges... Out there, says Wurm, lies Germany. Oh, you're mistaken. Germany is around us and within us. Aren't we the bones of Germany, ha ha. Wurm has become accustomed to what he likes to call my mordant humor. Germany is as close as the nearest maggot. It is the moisture that reaches us after each downpour... Can you be sure that it is rain, he said spitefully.

How close are we to the surface? I am here, while around me an entire nation with a stubborn zeal has brick by brick reconstructed the entire country... Each time someone hammers a nail, the sound reaches us as an insistent signal. *They* are completing another roof, Wurm will say despondently. How well I know those mediocre architects—how they schemed to put me out of the way. The entire conflict was basically an opportunity for the third- and fourth-rate architects to exercise their lack of imagination... What will they do next? What more lies in store for *our* post-war Germany?

We know that everything has changed and paradoxically that

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nothing has changed. We were programmed for death, Wurm said. Yet we cannot abandon that response to life even when it is no longer useful—I do not think, but somewhere the thinking is done for me. I cannot disagree. *What is it doing? What is it doing?* The high-pitched fretful voice of the Fetus kept repeating the question whenever there was the slightest lull, or in order to interrupt my fitful conversation with Wurm. Architekt Wurm, or might it not have been Wurmenthal, or Wurmenkranz, or Wurmenstein, or Wurmenheim, or Wurmenkranz? Alas, despite strenuous effort he cannot recall his name. Well, that takes care of any question regarding his successful career.

What is it doing? It was nothing but an infantile attempt to capture our or more likely Wurm's attention, with the latter, always obliging, always prepared to devote his attention to this—let's face it—this Fetus—with a fervor that I have come to consider pathological. As if it really mattered—as if what was revealed could have any significance at this late date. One simply had to put up with its petulantly voiced inquiry: *What is it doing?* Over and over again. *One* would have thought, and with good reason, that the void into which we had slipped would not merely terminate all thought but also extinguish my urge to respond to the Fetus's provocations: its ceaselessly petulant demands for attention. *What is?* Piss off you five-months old unaborted twit. Please, Wurm said reproachfully. When I try to imagine what it looks like I can only summon up a disconcerting vision of a fetus serenely floating in a large medicinal jar of formaldehyde. *Our little Feete,* Wurm likes to say. Thereby, consciously or not, turning me as well into a surrogate father for this Fetus that had never left its protective embryonic chamber, until well after its mother was killed! No, not even then!

What next? Greater freedom? A growing capacity to explore the surrounding idyllic countryside? Wurm used to spend weekends in nearby Thorswald while construction of the house he had designed was underway. It's fine, I tell him, don't worry. It withstood the war. Is there no other way of seeing our Germany? Wurm asked. Must we continue to peer at it through the thick undergrowth of this gloomy forest. Fetus groans theatrically. I almost prefer the Fetus's company—it's more pliable...more adaptable. What about you? Wurm asks.

WHAT DO I SEE? One need only dig one or two meters below the

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ground to uncover evidence... In retracing my, Ja ja, *my* final halting steps with one of those sturdy hand-held by now doubtlessly obsolete metal detectors one can extract a succession of faint almost plaintive bleeps from the overgrown path and the ditches along the country road from Heiligenthal to—I don't even know to where? What's plain? the Fetus wanted to know. Permit me to continue! Plaintive not plain, said Wurm.

To return to my subject: Our Germany. I failed to reach the destination. In the picture I have retained of this forced march, the sky in all its grayness had shrunk to permit the decimated forest, the ditches filled with the overflow of war to expand. Each bleep of the mine sweeper—or so I imagine—will signify the presence, somewhere in the soil underneath, of dented helmets, beltbuckles, various insignias, metal buttons with tiny swastikas, spent shells, the minutia of the Wehrmacht, discarded battle worn equipment, the bits and pieces of a vanquished army—the remnants of the endless string of smashed and scorched armored vehicles pushed into ditches so as not to impede the return or was it the retreat. Oh, believe me, I made a strenuous, a frantic attempt to keep up as we, in ever smaller and smaller groups, starting out with forty, then thirty, then down to a pitiful dozen, urged on by the still indefatigable guards, all foaming at the mouth, kept pace with the retreating Wehrmacht which, following a parallel route, by then had been reduced to a crawl. Let's not rush into death, I kept thinking. Yes, I was trying to keep up... Yes, yes. Trying my utmost to persuade whoever might be about to shoot me that I was still of some use. I expelled my final breath while clinging to the absurd belief that a word, yes, perhaps one single word, of course, only as long as it would be the right word, might—however precarious the situation—deflect the bullet and save my life. If we did not share a common humanity at least we shared a language of sorts. If a German, a soldier in the Wehrmacht could still retain his faith in the meaning of a word—if without any prompting from his superiors, he could arrive at the word: *Mutter*, as he, struggling against the ominous signs that life—his life!—was escaping, repeated the word as if it might at that crucial stage materialize or, at least, bring him in close proximity to this most desirable image, why shouldn't my word, if it happened to be the right word, the appropriate word, be it *Mutter*, or *Bitte*, or *Danke*, or *Guten Tag mein lieber Herr*, result in a momentary reprieve. *Mutter, meine Mutter*, said the Fetus, testing or was he

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tasting the word... *Mutter! Mutter!* Was it not entirely possible that some individual, whatever his role, momentarily affected by the power of the word, and what it signified, might intervene to prevent or at least momentarily delay my death by remarking to the man with the gun at my head: *Ach, las doch.* Indeed, this only goes to show the degree to which we—even at the moment of our death—continue to delude ourselves. By the time I reached the end, I had with glazed eyes passed dozens, no, more likely hundreds of stick-like skeletal figures marking our circuitous path, each coiled in what I could only call a restless embrace of death. It was as if they were feverishly resolved to worm or knot themselves into dying and thereby accustom themselves to death. Wurm defensively muttered: Mor... mor...mormor...bid. Everywhere, I continued, raising my voice: An unpleasant odor. Bodies of men, women in untidy heaps...their final desire it would seem, to make themselves appear inconspicuous...while here and there what looked like a squashed turnip turned out to be a child that, on an impulse, may have been smashed against a tree to test what? Its or our endurance? How? How what? You didn't... I said to the Fetus. That's the point. Luckily you failed to materialize. You never emerged. You were still sustained in a womb...which under the circumstances... *Nein*, it protested wildly, *Nein, Nein!*

Who needs this I said, withdrawing into...into what?

All killings at that time were entirely unpredictable. A guard luxuriating in his rage bashed her head with his rifle butt and then, as a send-off, administered a few final kicks. I happened to be present. Everything at the moment, the overcast sky, a passing horse-drawn cart, the wizened apples on a tree, seemed excessive. More than the brain could absorb. My response? Minimal. I was too far gone. I may have averted my face. We are talking of the final days of the war and the retreating numbed Germans and Austrians, and their compatriots, their remaining allies, loyal if shifty-eyed Ukranians and Rumanians, who were in the grips of an almost pardonable rage. At best of times they were emotionally unstable. To avert fear they asserted their authority. Well, whatever happened to the mother, Fetus's deplorable ending could hardly be considered an exit. It, the infant-to-be, must have been bounced around for hundreds of kilometers... Yet this speck of non-identity was becoming more assertive by the hour. I could see *it* growing as it, with Wurm's

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imaginative assistance, attained a minimal awareness of the world. It was only a matter of time before we became *its* appendage.

At this late stage one can hardly speak of expectations. What I recall, I recall most vividly. Even my last gasps. Were they accompanied by an image—a final film strip of experiences of faces? Is every ending a disjunctive replay...? And then? One would reasonably expect that a bullet fired from close proximity, as it tunneled its way through that complex thinking apparatus, as it destroyed life, would also bring my boundless irritation to an end. Oh, the poor dear, my mother used to say complacently. I can see the calm expression on her face. He's annoyed...he's irritated. What can we do? She used to look at me, detached, unmoved by my frantic endeavor to escape...to climb out of the crib. We must do something quickly. Did nothing alleviate my childhood boredom, my irritation? And now? Again the Fetus speaks up to remind us of its presence. *What what what what what?*

But why do I not withdraw? Shut myself off? It so happened that Wurm and I find ourselves on the same wavelength. Let's face it. Inappropriate term—we are hardly in a position to face anything. Words keep rushing forward, jostling for meaning when meaning has ceased to matter. Well, not entirely. For Wurm, meaning justified or at any rate illuminated *death in life* and conversely gives evidence of what Freud doubtlessly would have considered a *life in death*. Though we were beyond the reach of fear, language is still able to fuel a certain anxiety. *Dear me! What is it doing now?* The Fetus's annoying falsetto. But why, I would like to know, the continuous reference to *It?* Can't you bring yourself to simply say, *I*. But the Fetus, implanted in some shed or overcrowded barrack—did they refer to it as Bumbsen or Ficken?—during a hurried perhaps even enforced sexual encounter under circumstances best forgotten, prefers to equivocate. By resorting to the pronoun *it*, it can postpone forever the question of its gender. Perhaps I am being thoroughly unfair. But, is there any reason why I shouldn't give way to my destructive impulses at this late stage—If not now, when?

Wurm admitted that if early in the war, by some miraculous intervention, he had been given an opportunity, how gladly he would have seized the chance to prove himself to *them*, by contributing to the *Führerbauten*, designing for the German army monu-

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ments that symbolized the "heroic scale of life," anything... anything... Mausoleums based on heroic Roman or Greek models...anything... Victory arches, ornately fashioned metal gates for war cemeteries... Once again, seated at a drafting board, he would have—barely containing his joy—plunged head-long into his assignment. Ah, once again to grip a compass, a triangular scale, a ruling pen...to slide a triangle along the length of a T-square...to sharpen the 2B lead pencil. And then the quiet satisfaction of producing a perfect line...was this not also a prerequisite for the construction of an edenic settlement—the ultimate residence? He remained convinced that his brain would have instantly adjusted to the transition—one moment a hair's breadth from death, the next adjusting the height of his stool as he prepared to design...what? Need one ask? Anything? A post office, a court house, a railroad station, an observation or anti-aircraft tower, barracks for troops or for forced labor, factories for Krupp or Stahl-Eins... I'd do it and even, I will admit it, derive a certain satisfaction from seeing a structure—whatever its purpose—evolve on the drafting paper that I had pinned to the large drafting table, Wurm said. Do you need underground bunkers, I'd inquire. U-boat pads, a more efficient crematorium, or fancy marble statuary? I would have just as gladly worked on the reconstruction of the German cities that had been so effectively pulverized by American bombers. Come now, I said: No inhibitions whatever? What? To prolong my life? To let me spend an additional day, week, month, year joyfully at my drafting board. You'd rebuild this nation? Gladly. With sheer pleasure! It's what I was trained to do. Not to rest forever on the alert for the footsteps of the occasional trespassers, nature lovers, people with dogs...people who do not expect to be shot! Like Wurm I could vividly recall the moment of my death: He, this individual, simply raised his hand and aimed his pistol in the general direction of my head. No wavering. No indecision. Finger firmly on trigger—I could see the dirt under the fingernail. The hand guided him. I didn't have the presence of mind to scream: You are about to destroy a future Renaissance! The Fetus shrieked with laughter. What hyperbole! said Wurm. What bullshit! What next?

The thought occurred to me that Wurm and I have survived in order to recreate in all its refulgent "splendor" the world for a five-months old that never managed to exit from the womb... What was the mother's name? I have forgotten her name as well. She, the

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Fetus's mother, has discreetly withdrawn—not let out a peep in years... Why? Was it shame? Perhaps by now she was beyond our reach? Perhaps she was stone DEAD. How singular? Had she unlike us been rendered speechless? Or possibly she resented our hold on her child-to-be? We admitted this five-months old into our male world. Yet, one could not rule out that the Fetus might be a female. *Just don't interfere,* Wurm warned me. He keeps hectoring the Fetus. *What do you recall?* And, referring to the womb, *Do you recall being at ease? Do any particular colors come to mind?* And our Fete, this jar baby, clinging to every word the way it might have to its mother's nipples at a later stage, replied: *Explain womb.*

Selten... We are to the North, approximately 20 kilometers away as the crow... Tranquility? Of course. A huge bee buzzes the tombstone. We are invulnerable I keep telling myself. Beyond molestation. It crawls along the surface... Not infrequently visitors, mostly trespassers, Our Germans, as Wurm refers to them, stumble across the clearing and then with bemused expressions read the by now almost illegible inscription on the plain gravestone: Jesus! Would you believe it, Jews! In fact the two men, now sprawled on the sun-dappled grass, rifles at their feet, leisurely eating dark bread with cheese and Jagdwurst and drinking wine, their backs to the stone, had at first appeared baffled by its presence...reading and rereading the by now far from clear inscription aloud, as if they did not trust what it said, one doubtfully shaking his head as if unable to arrive at a plausible explanation for the presence of the grave here, in the forest, so close to their village. Now, as they spoke in the virtually incomprehensible local dialect (just listen to that, Wurm said), their dog (it's a pointer, Wurm maintained—I disagreed, it's just a shit-mongrel like us), suddenly overcome by an unaccountable frenzy, raced in an ever widening circle only to abandon the pursuit of his invisible prey, and ecstatically roll in the grass and then, finally, subdued, trace the baseline of the gravestone with his nose, furiously sniffing...as if his moist cold nose could detect our presence. The ant colony on the shady side seemed more active than ever. Several redoubtable ants had already reached the double-edged hunting knife with the carved bone handle left on one of the knapsacks. Observe carefully, I said to the Fetus. That is how people act. They arrive, they make themselves at home. They temporarily occupy a space. Eat, defecate... It's theirs temporarily. Our stone has been turned into a convenient table. We call it a public space, said

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Wurm derisively. The cutting edge of the exposed blade was covered with a film of grease... By now a number of ants were already staggering back to the nearby colony under a load five and six times their size, each struggling to maneuver the tiny pieces of sausage skin, bread, and whatever else the men may have been eating.

How close are we to the surface? That is called a nose, I said to the Fetus. And that is a mustache. Those orifices are nostrils. Orifices? Tiny openings in the nose. And the Fetus dutifully repeats: Nose, mustache, orifices, nostrils. OK? Easily irritated, Wurm asks: Where did it pick up the OK?

Several unevenly torn and crumpled pieces of newspaper, showing evidence of being smeared, an unsightly appearance, somehow remained near the base of a giant fir tree the tip of which was beginning to turn an ominous yellow. As hard as I try I couldn't make out the small print on the newspaper... We are stale news, said Wurm. Now, life is uneventful. Once in a while a frisky dog may relieve himself against a tree or a stone—frequently ours for it is the most prominent. The men, wearing the knee pants, woolen socks, and sturdy laced shoes favored by people in these parts, are discussing the game warden... I hang on their words.

Two men...said Fetus, having evidently given this matter some thought, Two men and... Flies buzzing something that is hidden from view by the tall grass... Now and then a bird settles on the crumbling stone and lets out a warbling song. What is it? the Fetus inquired. I just throw bird names at him—That's a robin, that's a thrush, that's a finch. And the Fetus, which has never felt an elbow prod it in its ribs, readily accepted my point of view.

What am I able to see? One hundred billion neurons actively constructing or reassembling a picture...? There were, I would assume, years of practice in the guard's fluid motion. I try to be more precise. Killing was second nature to him. If questioned, the man who shot me—I vividly recall his broad face—would doubtlessly maintain that I stepped into the path of his bullet. I interfered... How often have I followed the trajectory of that bullet as it severed—in a split second—my relationship to... More poetry, complained Wurm. But, nowadays, what constitutes evidence? What would stand up in a court of law? I try to imagine the legalistic and

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doubtlessly somber conduct of the present-day prosecutors and impartial judges—who, at the most, were barely old enough to assemble a Panzerfaust in 1945—as they confront the unsightly evidence in courts of law that may have been constructed as late as the 60s or 70s. The witnesses are elderly and agitated. The accused are slightly bored. The acoustics have been improved—as a result the spoken language has a different resonance. As for the architecture... Well, an attempt has been made to give it a less forbidding appearance. The interiors are less monumental, less feudal...and the atmosphere, if not utterly relaxed or casual, less severe. The judge dutifully casts a doubtful eye at the accused, a former guard, at the witnesses and at the accumulated evidence—it includes a dagger and belt buckle bearing what resembles an ancient tribal insignia. The insignia's name is on the tip of my tongue. Prominently on display a recently unearthed and yet unidentified skull that is marked by what appear to be bullet holes. One hole on the left temple the other (caused by the same bullet?) at the back.

I would like to believe that my name itself cannot disappear, Wurm said. Well, I challenged him, what was your name? Will you let us know... He makes an effort but all he can recall are initials on stationery, on towels, on silverware...and past commissions: The Römer Haus and the "Chilehaus" in Hamburg, the Wertheim Department store, the Aachen Railroad Station, the Steinhorst Estate near Ratzeburg, the "Glasshaus" at the Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition, and the Einstein Observatory in Potsdam and a hat factory in Luckenwalde? No, that was Erich... Oh dear.

Evidence? of what? My... My first commission, he said, was in a small resort town not far from the Czechoslovakian border. I built the house, a vacation home, for my in-laws. Two floors, two bedrooms, a small terrace with an exceptional view of the surrounding countryside. I employed local labor. I was a novice and they took advantage of my inexperience. I remember spending all my waking hours in the house—my first house. I did not yet have an office. It was a labor of love. Two miles above the town was a quarry... I used stone from the quarry for the terrace and the garden walls. After the house was completed my wife and I would frequently spend a weekend there. Sometimes we had the house to ourselves. By that time there were political prisoners working in the quarry... One rationalized the reason for the prisoners in the quarry. One soon

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came to rationalize everything. My father-in-law had a small suitcase handy in the event that he had to suddenly leave—the word "leave" being a euphemism. I don't know if at the time it occured to me that I too would have to leave. I no longer remember all the houses I built. I try to count them... One in Dusseldorf, two in Frankfurt, one in Berlin. My favorite? I would think, the house in Thorswald. Well, at least you were able to enjoy life, I said.

The first house remains by far the most distinctive, the most memorable... Well, every beginning... Wurm attempts to recall other beginnings... His first day in Rome, his first day in Venice... I'd like to revisit Thorswald. Only a short distance away, I remarked. To my annoyance the Fetus laughed when I laughed. His laughter seemed to be mocking mine.

Somewhere, I remain convinced... I... I... I?...there are faded documents of us, traces of a former existence... Somewhere, carefully stored in an old leather briefcase or a creased portfolio, seams undone... Somewhere in boxes and stored for a future age in attics or cellars, somewhere far below or above everyday activities... oversized envelopes containing letters and sepia colored prints, snapshots, in which nameless streets, cars, and pastel-colored buildings serve as a background for what... I... I... I?...people, former friends, families on an excursion or a vacation with a view of a tranquil body of water, the time and place, unless marked on the back of the print, irretrievably lost... The names always on the tip of one's tongue. No matter. What it does is provide evidence of an existence...a punctilious marking. To me, the thought of my former presence still occupying a surface provides a reassurance—How to explain?—that life precedes death. No matter what, one cannot die unless one has—isn't that true? That... I... I... I...did exist. There is ample evidence...this was definitely me at the age of twenty-three... The face gaunt, mouth turned downward in petulance, holding on to a platitudinous resolve to construct... Ah, once again to luxuriate in that petulance... How do I arrive at the conclusion that my former restlessness has stabilized the routines of my death, and that the intruding signs of life may in fact provide the means for an eternal monologue—or is it a dialogue? No, says Wurm, categorically refuting what I maintain is what I now experience, *the life of death.* Perhaps we live only in order to bring language to our death. Perhaps we live only to bring a coherence into the hereafter?

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Wurm has, I'm sure, more convincing explanations... This is too much. ... I... I...have lost track of years...

There's bound to exist proof of my existence, Wurm steadfastly maintained. There are bound to be survivors. Former friends. Former clients. Aside from the people presently inhabiting the interiors I designed. But what am I pursuing? An identity? I might as well wish to perpetuate a serial number.

Enemy? I say to Wurm, testing him.

Oh, I guess, prior, he said undecidedly. Or former, or previous or earlier, or past...

Convictions?

Also prior. Sure.

Perceptions?

Again, prior. By then, I could barely contain my laughter.

Understanding?

Wurm takes his time. He says: I'm not in the least inhibited. Understanding. Isn't it unavoidable. We take understanding to the grave, eh?

But out of habit he still asks: And what do you see?

I know what's in the offing. One day soon the heavy earth moving equipment, the distant rumbling of which is audible to us during the day, will come forcefully crashing through the forest to level, for the airport, our area at one sweep... Would that then entail another existence... You thrive on panic, Wurm said accusingly.

When I ascended to the clearing, I watched three men struggling up the path with a large unwieldy bundle. I clung to their words. Language come alive. To communicate freely, openly. To be understood. *Scheisdreck*, said one. Shut up, said the other. Behind me or to my side the presence of the Fetus as I stare at the body, the thick rope binding the plastic gave it a sausage-like appearance... The skin bursting. Once again I was actually able to taste my own demise—a metallic taste I found abhorrent. For all I knew, as I proceeded into the thickly wooded area, I might have been looking at my own body. For in death, doesn't one's body mirror all others. What is death? the Fetus asked. *Tod,* I answered.

What's that?

Tod ist Tod!

How can you tell?

Easily, I said, and recited for his enlightenment: *Todesahnung*, a

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presentiment of death, *Todesangst*, fear of death, *Todesanzeige*, death notice, *Todesart*, manner of death, *Todesblässe*, deadly pallor.

It doesn't follow, said the Fetus.

Todesengel, angel of death, *Todeserklärung*, declaration of death, *Todesfall*, case of death, *Todesfurcht*, fear of death, *Todesgefahr*, danger of death, *Todeskampf*, death struggle, *Todeskandidat*, death candidate, *Todeskeim*, seeds of death, *Todesmutig*, fearlessness, *Todesnachricht*, report of death, *Todesopfer*, death, *Todesqualen*, pangs of death, *Todesröcheln*, death-rattle, *Todesstoss*, death blow, *Todesstrafe*, death sentence, *Todesstrahlen*, deathrays, *Todesstunde*, hour of death, *Todessturz*, fatal fall, *Todestag*, anniversary of death, *Todesursache*, cause of death, *Todesurteil*, death sentence, *Todesverachtung*, defiance of death, *Todeswunde*, mortal wound, *Todeswunsch*, death wish.

It doesn't follow. Please repeat. Where is *it* now? Where is *it* now?

Let me put it another way, I said calmly, confidently, knowing that the words I would need would without prompting arrive at the tip of my invisible tongue.

For the Fetus history is nothing but the trajectory of sperm, struggling against tremendous odds. Its plaintive question: *What is it doing?* conveys a pathos to which I happily remain immune. Under my present tutelage it has developed an interest in what lies outside the grave. Come, I will show you our Germany!

What else do I know? I observe the steady motion of the painters with undisguised admiration, while Wurm, critical as always, made some disparaging remarks: Just look at those creeps! Look at the shoddy work! Look at the scaffolding. Any moment now it'll give way. They don't even know how to tie a proper knot.

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